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FARMERS' SUICIDES AN IMPEDIMENT TO SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA: A STUDY OF KARNATAKA STATE

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi said that 'India lives in villages'. It is true that majority of our people live in the villages engaged mainly in agriculture and allied activities as the main source of their income. As a key to Indian economy agriculture plays a significant role in the socio-economic development of the country and socio - cultural life of our people. The rainfall in India is unpredictable. Failure of monsoon results in the failure of crops, as a result the farming community fails to pay back the debt they have taken from different financial institutions and private money lenders. They are over burdened with principal amount and interest. This brings misery, helplessness and frustration among farmers, specially small scale and marginal scale farmers. As a result some farmers may take an extreme step of ending their life. The phenomenon of suicide among farmers in India was noticed from 1997 and onwards from Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh, where pesticides used by farmers failed to control the pests due to adulteration which resulted in the loss of crops. This loss of crops drove the farmers to suicide. The union and the state governments have taken various confidence building measures like waiving of the loan of small and marginal farmers, extension of subsidy on fertilizers, providing agricultural loan at 3 per cent interest through cooperative institutions, Apart from the above, measures should be taken for the effective implementation of crop insurance scheme, health insurance schemes, educating the farmers about crop growing patterns and other measures may develop confidence in the farmers and they may not take extreme step of ending the life.

Keywords: Agriculture, Economy, Farmer, Frustration, Monsoon, Marginal, Suicide

Introduction

India is the land of agriculture with an agriculture based economy. Most of the Indian population lives in its villages and thus the contribution of agriculture to Indian economy becomes very important. 43 per cent of India's territory is employed for agricultural activities. Agriculture along with other allied activities like forestry, fishing etc provides employment to 60 per cent of India's population. Agriculture also provides for 8.56 per cent of the country's total exports. The contribution of agriculture to Indian economy in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is declining steadily year by year due to the process of Industrialization and the economic growth gathered momentum in different five year plans with the manufacturing and service sectors growing rapidly and agriculture limping along, the percentage share of agriculture in GDP reached a level of 17.8 per cent in 2007-08 (1). According to Union Finance Minister the GDP from agriculture, forestry and fishing for the year 2008-09 was 16 per cent. Despite a steady decline of its share in GDP, agriculture is still the largest economic sector and plays a significant role in the overall socio economic development of our country. It is the main source of food to the growing population of our country. Our country could achieve the self sufficiency of food grains in few decades of its political emancipation. The food production in India

reached to 213 million tons in 2001-02. It was increased to 231 million tonnes in 2007-08 and there was a decrease of the same by one million tons (230 million tons) in 2008-09 due drought in some states, flood in some other states, and also due to agricultural crises.

India has the net sown area of 142 million hectares 92.6 million hectares area is dependent on natural rainfall and the remaining is the irrigated area. This shows that the dry land area farming to the Indian farmer is inevitable. The crops that are grown in the dry land farming are Jowar, pulses, oilseeds, cotton etc. The Indian farmer is mainly dependent on timely rainfall i.e., on bounties of nature. The rainfall in India is unpredictable. Failure of monsoon results in the failure of crops. Due to which Indian agriculture is termed as Gamble of Monsoon (2).

Karnataka

Karnataka is one of the eighth largest states in India. It has nearly five and half crores of population, of which 76 percent of people live in villages. About 65 percent of them are engaged in agriculture. Contribution of agriculture to the total income of the state is 49 per cent. About 78.3 percent of the agricultural land is rain fed. 125 lakh hectares of land is used for agricultural purpose. The major food crops of

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the state are rice, ragi, jowar, maize, millets, wheat and pulses and major cash crops are ground nut, sugarcane, cotton, tobacco, coconut, coffee etc. Karnataka State Gross Domestic Product from agriculture to the national economy is about 28 per cent. Kharif is the major season which contributes about 70 percent of agricultural production and the balance of 30 percent comes from Rabi/Summer seasons.

One of the recent surveys points out that there are twelve crores of small and marginal farmers in our country. Their land holdings are below two hectares, they constitute almost 80 per cent of the Indian farmers, and more than 90 per cent of them are dependent on rain for their crops. Karnataka state has 51,61,131 small and marginal farmers. Karnataka is one of the states facing severe agricultural crises since many years. Whatever the farmers earn is sufficient to meet out their basic requirements of life. They also depend on agricultural income for the education and marriage of their children. Under these circumstances if there is failure of rain, failure of crops, lack of remunerative prices for their products, exorbitant interest they are paying for the debt they have taken from the money lenders and the financial institutions bring the stressful situation and this in turn causes helplessness and frustration among the farming community. The farmers who fail to overcome such a stressful situation and anxiety prefer to kill themselves. Emile Durkheim, a

French Anthropologist and an authority on the study of suicide call such act of self destruction as 'anomie' (3).

The high rate of suicides among farmers of Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh caught the attention of politicians, policy makers and also the academicians of the country by the end of 1990. The pesticides used by farmers failed to control the pests due to adulteration which resulted in the loss of crops. In some parts, the farming community was supplied with inferior quality of seeds. The disgusted farmers committed suicide. The 'suicidal current' gradually spread to other states, but it is more in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattisgarh states. These states altogether have one third of the country's population but two-thirds of farmers' suicides. The rate at which farmers are killing themselves in these states is far higher than suicide rates among non-farmers (4). Close to 150,000 farmers have committed suicides in nine years from 1997 to 2005. By 2007 the total number of suicides by farmers went up to 182,936. According to National Crime Records Bureau on an average, one farmer committed suicide every 32 minutes in nine years from 1997 to 2005 on all India bases. According to one of the estimation on an average four farmers commit suicides every week. Union Government sources (during the question hour in the Rajya Sabha) pointed out that there are 9132 suicidal deaths of farmers between 2000-2001 to 2009-10 (Table 1) in Karnataka State.

Table.1 Farmer Suicides in Karnataka State 2000-2001 to 2009-10.

2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
2630	2505	2340	708	271	163	176	182	143	14

* Based on the figures reported by State Govts.

The Government of Karnataka initially paid the compensation of rupees one lakh each of families of victim. The suicides by farming community went on increasing without any check. Later, it was felt by government that the payment of compensation could be one of the reasons for these acts of self destruction. Further, it was also felt that some people in agrarian India started to equate suicides due to personal reasons with the suicides due to failure of crops to get compensation from state.

The farmers, in the traditional farming were using traditional seeds, manures and primitive implements for farming work. The expenditure on agriculture was minimum. To meet out some unproductive expenditure for a temporary period the farmers were dependent on non-institutional sources of finance comprising of saukars, dalals, and money lenders. The institutional sources of finance were either absent or beyond the reach of these small and marginal farmers. Consequently, the burden of debt on them was minimum. The joint family system was prevailing; members of the family together were facing any critical

situation with lot of courage and self confidence. But, now farmers lack these qualities due to the absence of joint family system and emergence of nuclear families in place of joint family system. Any critical situation in nuclear family is faced only by few members specially husband and wife only in majority of the cases. This may result in frustration and mental conflicts. The farmer who fails to face such a critical situation may decide to kill himself.

Emphasizing the importance of joint family asserts that in joint family each member was secure. The joint families in olden days were extending moral support to its members at the time of all crises. The majority of victims who committed suicides were surprisingly came from nuclear families (5). Even Durkheim in his monumental contribution 'La Suicide' speaks of the co-relationship that exist between family size and incidence of suicides. According to him there exists an 'inverse relationship between family size and tendency towards suicides', writes: "A person is almost certainly well insured morally when isolated and left to him self than when constantly under beneficent discipline of

family surroundings"(3). Also feels that failure of social institutions to instill and establish confidence among those who are on the verge of breakdown is one of the main factors responsible for the suicide among farmers (5).

With the Invention of state-of-art agricultural implements, HYV seeds, effective pesticides and chemical fertilizers and with the ever increasing demand for a agricultural products farmers showed lot of interest in incorporating new methods of cultivation. They started cultivating cash crops, like sugarcane, ground nut, tobacco which can fetch them more income. They are investing too much on HYV seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides and also on agriculture implements like harvesters, tractors etc. This is how labour intensive farming transformed itself into capital intensive farming. The procedure of getting loans has been simplified. Consequently, the present farming community is at the risk of falling in debt trap than ever before.

The thinkers who have studied the farmer's distress and anguish identified the following causes for the distress.

- Prof. K Nagaraj of Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) points out that "from the mid – 90s onwards prices and farm incomes crashed. As costs rose – even as bank credit dried up – so did indebtedness. Even as subsidies for corporate farmers in the west rose, we cut our few, very minimal life supports and subsidies to our own farmers. The collapse of investment in agriculture also meant it was and is most difficult to get out of this trap" (6).
- Dandekar, Narawade, et; al state that "repeated crop failures, inability to meet the rising cost of cultivation, and indebtedness seem to create a situation that forces farmers to commit suicide" (7).
- Mentioning the cause of farmers suicide Vaidyanathan, A says that "farmers suicides are associated with high level of indebtedness is popularly and even in some academic writings , seen as indicative of the Indian peasantry in general suffering from unbearable burden of debt and teetering on the brink of bankruptcy" (8).
- Stating about farmers indebtedness of Vandana Shiva points out that in 1998, the World Bank's structural adjustment policies forced India to open up its seed sector to global corporation. Farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds. The poor peasants have to buy new seeds for every planting season and what was a traditionally a free resource, available by putting aside a small portion of the crop, becomes a

commodity. This new expense increases poverty and leads to indebtedness (9).

- Kailash, M., points out that "The indebtedness of Indian Farmers rose markedly in 1990s following the turn by successive Indian governments to market reforms and the opening up of the Indian economy to foreign investors. Prior to 1991, 25 per cent of Indian peasants were indebted. Now, according to the figures provided by P. Sainath, the rural affairs editor of the Hindu, 70 percent of farmers in the state of Andhra Pradesh are in debt. In Punjab the figure is 65 percent, Karnataka 61percent and Maharashtra 60 percent" (10).
- Aruna Burte, Sangeeta Rege and Padma Deosthali opine that the farmers are unable to cope up with the sudden changes in cropping patterns, market fluctuations, and use of pesticides to increase the yield. These are direct results of agricultural policy driven by market forces. When the crops fail, they are in debt, which they have no means to repay. They are unable to perform the role of provider for the family. All these factors are to be taken in to consideration while understanding an individual farmer committing suicide (11).

Apart from the opinion of the above thinkers the following factors are stated as the causes for farmer's suicides.

- Failure of Crops – Failure of crops due to the failure of rainfall, drought, destruction of crops due to pests and use of low quality of seeds.
- Increasing prices - Increasing prices of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, in toto increasing prices of all agricultural inputs.
- Financial stress – This is due to price crash of agricultural prices and debt burden.
- Scarcity of water – due to failure of rainfall, failure of bore wells, sharp decrease in ground water table.
- Improper supply of electricity by different electrical companies in the respective regions and consequently inability of the farmers to supply water to the fields.
- Inadequate services by the agricultural departments to provide proper counseling on farm technologies.
- Failure of the governmental institutions to meet out the needs and aspirations of the farming community.

The untimely rains during August-September 2009 in the northern part of Karnataka left the trial of

destruction and loss of life had caused the loss of life and property. As per the statistics provided by the state government totally 191 persons have lost their life due to this untimely rains. The various crops were submerged in the flood water and resulted in the loss of crops. The small and marginal farmers who had taken loan from different financial institutions were disgusted and some of them died of heart attack and some of them committed suicide. In Dharwad district five farmers had committed suicide and in Bagalkot district five farmers had committed suicide in spite of the various measures taken by the state and the union government.

In response to the alarming increase in farmers' suicides the Government of Karnataka appointed a Joint House Committee of Karnataka (1999) under the Chairmanship of Sri G B Shivakumar, former Member of Legislative Assembly to study the farmers' problems with reference to suicides in detail and submit a report on it to the government. Accordingly, the committee studied sixty reported cases of suicidal deaths of farmers and submitted a report to the government. Out of the sixty cases examined by the Joint House Committee, in only one case payment of compensation was recommended for the loss of crops and non-payment of loan by the farmer. For rest of the cases the committee categorically opined that the suicides were on account of "personal and domestic problems" rather than crop loss and hence no compensation was recommended. The Committee came with several recommendations. One of the important recommendations of the Joint House Committee was that while there is a need and justification to give immediate relief for the natural calamity victims, giving compensation to the dependents of suicide victims should be dispensed with, as this would have cascading effect on the Society (12).

The Government of Karnataka commissioned an 'Expert Committee' in August 2002, under the Chairmanship of Dr. G. K. Veeresh, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore to study the 55th and 56th recommendations of Joint Legislative Committee. It was asked by the government to find out the causes for farmers suicides and suggest remedial and preventive measures. The 'Expert Committee', involved academicians drawn from various disciplines namely Economics, Sociology, Psychiatry and Agricultural sciences. The task before the Committee was to examine thoroughly the 55th and 56th recommendations made by Joint Legislative Council. Those recommendations were related with the payment of compensation and confidence building measures to be taken by the government in the interest of the farming community. The 'Expert Committee' studied 130 cases of suicides throughout the state and submitted a detailed report to the government in April 2003. The committee made certain recommendations

and fully agreed with the 55th and 56th recommendations of the Joint Legislative Committee that the confidence building measures should be taken instead of paying of compensation to families of the victims. Some notable recommendations of the committee are:

- A separate 'Farmers Welfare Department' should be established in the state and it should function under the direct supervision of the Chief Minister.
- Farmers Welfare Fund (FWF) should be created and measures should be taken for its proper utilization.
- The farmers who have crossed 60 years of age should be considered as 'senior farmers' and special concessions should be extended to them.
- Health insurance plans should be designed at the state level for the benefit of farming community.
- 'Farmers Communication Centers' should be strengthened and farmers should be encouraged to engage themselves in income generating activities which are complimentary to agriculture like poultry, dairy, mushroom cultivation, sericulture etc. They should be given basic infrastructure along with subsidized financial support.
- Measures should be taken for the regular supply of electricity for agricultural purposes.
- The irrigation facilities should be extended to non-irrigated areas.
- Necessary amendments may be brought to the existing Land Reforms Act.
- Measures should be taken to educate the farmers along with general public about the harmful effects of alcohol. To create awareness among the farmer's special measures should be taken at village panchayat level. The village panchayat should be empowered to grant/cancel the license to arrack shop.

Analysing the causes for farmer's suicides the Committee found that consumption of alcohol, ill health and family problems have also contributed to the farmers' suicides. Committee pointed out that failure of crops was one of the causative factors but not main cause.

The Government of Karnataka accepted the recommendations of the Committee. But in the mean time there was mounting pressure on the government to pay the compensation to the families of the victims. The Government appointed a 'Cabinet Sub-Committee' to implement the recommendations of the expert committee.

As an immediate measure the government announced the special package of Rs.856 crores to the farmer's community and the following measures were taken.

- The farmers were exempted from the payment of interest on crop loans. Further they were exempted from the payment of water tax and land revenue.
- Arrangements were made to supply the seeds at the subsidized rates to the small and marginal farmers.
- The small scale and the marginal farmers were encouraged to grow horticultural crops. To reach this objective the loan facility was extended.
- Support price was given to certain agricultural products.
- The farmers were exempted from the penalty for the non-payment of electricity bill used for the purpose of irrigation.

The Cabinet Sub-committee further framed the guidelines for the payment of to the families of the farmers who have committed suicide.

- The farmer who has committed suicide should have possessed the cultivated land in his name.
- He should have taken the crop loan from any institutional financial agencies and should have possessed the documents to the effect.
- Mere FIR by police is not a sufficient ground to get the compensation. The Assistant Commissioner of particular district / taluka has to ascertain the facts of suicide by visiting the victim's family and submit a report to the government. On the basis of this report the issue of paying compensation will be settled.

In order to mitigate the problem of rural indebtedness the Government of Karnataka has banned the private money lending business since 2002.

In spite of the various confidence building measures initiated by the state government the suicides by the farming community continued unchecked. To check this trend we can suggest the following measures.

- The cooperative farming should be encouraged so as to derive benefits of large scale cultivation, and government should take initiative to consolidate small holding.
- The existing co-operative societies should be strengthened. The efforts should be made to establish multi-purpose co-operative societies in all villages catering to the diverse needs of agriculturists.

- The farmers should be motivated to grow the crops which suit with the agro-climatic conditions and they should be encouraged to engage in organic farming.
- The farmers should be enlightened about the methods of using pesticides, manure fertilizers, suitable crop pattern through the proper media.
- The farmers counseling centers should be established at the village panchayat level

Conclusion

"Give man a fish, he will eat for a day but, teach him how to catch fish, he will eat for the rest of his life", so goes the popular saying, the case of our Indian farmers is similar to this, what they need is a means to sustain throughout their lives. If India is to shine, the farmers that need to be empowered.

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